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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the patterns of social interaction that develop when black and white children play together during the school day in free play periods. Observations were made of the regular sixth grade classrooms in two public schools. Both schools, one in a university town and one in a rural county, had approximately two thirds white children (both working and middle class) and one third working class black children. In both schools the classrooms were integrated. The process of game playing is examined in three situations: games where all children were of the same color, games in which a team of one color opposed the other color team, and games in which the group or team was mixed in color. In single color play, the pattern established is consensual, based on actual or assumed similarity. In color opposed play, the competitive pattern reinforces the solidarity of the color group while allowing stable interaction between the two colors. In mixed color groups, there is no consensus or solidarity. This instability leads to the development of new forms of playing which stabilize the game into a joint pattern. (Author/MC)

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Patterns of Cross-Color Play

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ABSTRACT

Patterns of Cross Color Play - Sylvia Knopp Edgar, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Wilmington, N.C.

Game play among white and black fifth grade boys in school free-play periods is examined for patterns of cross color interactions. The choosing of groups, decisions about rules,, and the process of play in: 1. single color games, 2. games in which teams of all white children compete against all black teams, 3. games in which teams contain both black and white members. Single color games were the most frequent and stable game situations. Of those games containing cross color interactions, games which were competitive between black and white teams were the most frequent and stable, since choosing teams was categorical by color, and rules easily negotiated. Mixed color teams were the least stable form, because both the choice of teams and agreement on the rules was difficult. The few mixed color teams which were successful, succeeded by developing new interaction forms.

Despite the fact that schools in many parts of the South have been integrated on a classroom level for a number of years, interactions between black and white children have been very limited. Residential segregation limits them in non-school time, and much of school time interaction is carried out within a formal setting which defines who interacts with whom and under what circumstances. Free play periods in school are one of the few situations in which black and white children can interact in a relatively unstructured way.

Given the general racism in our society and the particular ways in which schools deal with children by color, it is not surprising that even in free play, cross color interactions are limited. But one of the factor which limits these interactions is that children have not had sufficient experience with each other to develop models of social interaction across barriers; barriers which are, or are perceived to be, differences in definitions of the social situation (See Tindall, 1975 for an example of this problem between Anglos and Utes).

This study discusses the patterns of social interaction that develop when black and white children play together during the school day in free play periods. In studying social interaction, play has the advantage that it can be viewed as a model of social relationships (Moore and Anderson, 1969; Polgar, 1974; and Roberts, Arth and Bush, 1950). Also, while play is "serious business" to children, it is a relatively protected situation compared with other kinds of interactions that have occurred between blacks and whites in our society. It therefore allows for some experimentation by the participants, and rather easy observation by the anthropologist of what Goo enough (1976) calls microcultural processes.

The processes under investigation are the organization of games (including the formation of teams and the development of rules) and the course of game playing (including the degree of agreement and the duration of the game), in situations with different kinds of color groupings. From an examination of these processes, an attempt will be made to characterize the types of models of social relationships developed by the different color groupings.

The basic argument is that there are two kinds of interactions across color lines in these schools, competitive and joint. Competitive interaction reinforees the boundaries between color groups, but brings the groups into contact in a stable way. Joint interaction is relatively unstable, but has the potential of developing a form of interaction new to both groups; in this sense it is an emergent.

The data reported here were originally collected for a study of peer groups and children's play (see Polgar, 1974, 1976). Color groupings were not the focus of the study. All the boys in the regular sixth grade classrooms in two public schools were observed in 1973. Observations were made once or twice a week for a period of one month. Schools were purposefully chosen which had free play periods in which children could choose their own activities and form their own groupings.

The two schools are in medium sized southern towns, one a university town and the other a county seat. As one might expect, the school in the university town had over 50 percent middle class white children, some working class white children, and about one third black children, many of whose parents had service jobs in the university. The classrooms were well integrated. The other school was located in a rural county and had about two thirds whites (both working and middle class) and one third blacks (mainly the children of farm workers and unskilled laborers). Again the classrooms

were well integrated. The whites dominated in both numbers and status in both communities. Relationships between blacks and whites during the period of study were benign.

In formal physical education periods teachers carefully mixed groups of children by both sex and color, while in free play children tended to sort themselves into groupings by sex and color. Of the 29 games observed during free play, 12 were played exclusively by white or black children. In another 10 games, there were all white and all black teams opposing one another. Only in seven of the 29 games, did children play in groups or teams of mixed color.

The process of game playing will be examined in these three situations, to repeat: games where all children were of the same color, games in which a team of one color opposed the other color team, and finally games in which the group or team was mixed in color.

Single color games. Single color games usually began with a group of one color entering the playground, often with a ball in hand. The most common games in these schools for single color groups or teams were four square and basketball. (Basketball was played both as a team game or as a group game in which individuals played one on one.) Single color games, usually began without any formal choosing of teams or groups and without explicit statements of rules that were to apply. It is assumed this was because these children played regularly together. Games were organized quickly, usually within two minutes of entry onto the playground, and continued for long periods without interruption. Arguments, which were rare, were treated with concern, because they interrupted the progress of the game. Children responded to such interruptions by saying, "Let's get on with the game."

Color opposed games. Games in which teams of black children opposed a team of white children usually began by a cluster of children of one color suggesting, "Let's play German." German dodgeball and basketball were the two

games most frequently played in color opposition. If enough of the children agreed to play a game, they headed toward the court. There they would divide by color without explicitly saying so. In one case a boy said, "Let's play German against Mrs. Law's class," which had just entered the playground; however, the actual division of teams was by color, not classroom. In a basketball game, two boys emerged as leaders and clustered a group of their own color around them. In all cases, the game began quickly.

Rules were often stated at the beginning of the game, unlike games of single color groups where they seemed to have been assumed, or games of mixed color groupings where they were often in dispute during the game. However, once the rules were agreed upon arguments were rare, and as in single color games, were treated as unwanted interruptions in the play.

Concern in color opposed games was mainly to obtain fairness in the competition, while maintaining the color composition of the groups. In one case a black boy remarked that teams were uneven, nine black to six white boys. He said, "The teams are unfair, we have more than you do." Another black boy said, "They want it that way." The first boy asked, "Do you?" When a white boy assented, they began to play. In a game of kickball in which four whites played against two blacks, the competition was equalized by giving the black teams two "outs" per player. Finally, in a game of dodge-ball, in which girls played along with the boys, the white girls were being eliminated very quickly. A black boy suggested to the other black boys that they let their female black teammates hit the white girls, which they did.

As with single color games, color opposed play continued for long periods of time, games often being repeated when one game ended.

Mixed team or mixed group games. Games in which groups or teams were mixed by color took much longer to begin, presumably because they were not usual groupings. The organization thus required some kind of overt decision making. In one case two black boys tried to enter a game of four square

which had already been started by four white boys. Four square was a game black boys didn't usually play. These black boys were the only black children on the playground because the others were either absent or kept in after class. The two black boys stood near the court waiting to enter the game, which can be entered any time a boy is called out. They asked where the entry square was, but weren't told. They finally figured it out and stood waiting to enter. After a while a participant was called out and one black boy entered. In a game of touch football the teams were organized by two black boys out of a group of six black and ten white children. The boys organizing the teams each chose one team member in turn, except for one white boy, they chose the black boys first, presumably, picking them in order of their skill, forming teams each of which had three black and four white boys. In a mixed game of basketball, where one team consisted of two black and four white boys and the other of one black and three white boys, the game began with one black and one white boy forming teams. This took a relatively long time because, despite the choosing, there was some confusion as to who was on which team.

After the game begins, mixed color games have a number of characteristics which differ from either single color games or games in which teams of different color oppose either other. First, mixed color games had more arguments over rules during the process of the game than either of the other two types. These arguments had one of the following resolutions: either that the game was subtly or overly reconstituted into a color opposed form (2 cases) or the game was discontinued (3 cases) or the game was subtly changed in a way which resolved the conflict (2 cases).

Here are the two examples of the tendency to move a mixed team game into color opposition.. In one of the four square games in which black boys entered a white game, a black boy kept asking, "Don't get me out." When he was gotten out, he went to the entry square and later got back in.

After getting back in he hit a ball that the white boy couldn't return and the white boy was out, at which point the black boy said, "We're even." At this point the whole game began to be played as a competition between blacks and whites, although the form of the game is not a team game. In another instance of four square with a mixed color group, the white children began to play a type of "man-in-the-middle" game excluding the one black boy who was in the square. The black boys, who had been playing this game began to argue about the rules, and one black boy said, "They're making rules against me," and then to the whites, "You're chicken, you're afraid to play kickball." The other black boys agreed, and eventually the six went to play kickball, which they organized in a competitive form, pitting two black boys against four white boys.

A major problem in mixed groups in free play seems to be a lack of trust on the part of one group (in most cases the blacks) that the game is being played fairly. Another example was in a touch football game in which a black boy was accused of pass interference. "No, man, he pushed me like that once too," he replied, suggesting that he was not being allowed to do what another white boy had already done. "This lack of trust may be related to the fact that in most of these situations the black boys are in a minority and don't have, as in competition by color, a group to back them up.)

However, despite the instability of mixed team games, two of the seven games with mixed teams or groups continued for a relatively long time. In each of these two games, the particular combinations of boys seem to produce new forms of playing. In the first instance, the black boys in a four square game which had been full of arguments, began to handle the ball as if it were a basketball, passing it behind themselves before bouncing the ball. This new form was imitated by the white boys and became incorporated into

the game. It seemed to ease some earlier tension in the game, which finally continued for a fairly long period of time. In the touch football game organized by two black boys, the blacks monopolized the passing and receiving of the ball. This created arguments among their teammates. One of the white boys, guarding a black receiver began to guard as if he were a shadow of the receiver. The rest of the boys laughed at this, and the guard on the other team began to imitate him. This again seemed to relieve the tension.

In conclusion, the ease with which single color groups organize, adopt rules and play games would seem to be part of the history of interaction between these children, or children they view as like themselves. The pattern suggested by this type of game is consensual. A consensual pattern is based on actual or assumed similarity.

Color opposed play is based on both similarity and difference, similarity among members of a team and differences between teams. This pattern emphasizes solidarity within the group and fair competition between groups. This competitive pattern reinforces the solidarity of the color group, while allowing stable interaction between the two colors.

Mixed color groups do not seem to have either an established basis for concensus or an underlying solidarity. Such groupings are unstable, in the sense that they do not easily retain their original form. This instability leads to reorganizing the game into a more stable competitive form, or, occasionally, to the development of new forms of playing which seem to stabilize the game into what I will call a joint pattern. This joint pattern represents, for this group of children, an emergent interaction form.

Of the 29 games observed in this school 12 were played exclusively by children of one color group while 17 were played with some form of cross color interaction. Of these 17 games, ten were competitive and these were played for a long period of time without important disruptions, indicating that competition is one viable form of cross color interaction. It is dependent on maintaining within group solidarity and agreement on the rules for cross group relations.

In this sense it is an example on a micro level of what on a macro level would be a pluralistic model.

The seven remaining games, consisting of mixed teams, can be thought of as a integrationist model of social relations. These were more problematic, because except for two games, their form was either revised or the game ended. These games began neither with an assumption of the rules of interaction (as in the single color groups), nor an explicit statement of the rules of interaction (as in the color opposed groups). They were thus left to work out the rules for interaction in the process of playing. The working out often ended the game or changed its form.

What is interesting, though only suggestive because of the small number, is that the two groups which succeeded in continuing a mixed color game, did so by developing new forms of interaction, and these new forms seemed to have emerged from the conflict or distrust, and in turn resolve it.

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